

EXPRESSIVE WRITING: YOUR FIRST STEP

*Solving Chronic Mental and Physical Pain Begins by
Separating Yourself From Your Thoughts*



**"OVER ONE
HUNDRED
MILLION
AMERICANS
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CHRONIC
PAIN. ABOUT
ONE THIRD
ARE
DISABLED."**

FACING CHRONIC PAIN

David Hanscom, MD

Chronic pain is a US epidemic. One-third of Americans suffer from some level of it, and about 30 million people are significantly compromised. There are effective treatment options but most of them are not being implemented in the current medical environment. So, current approaches are often ineffective, limited, costly, and risky. We spend hundreds of billions of dollars each year on chronic pain with little, long-term benefit.¹

Suffering from chronic mental/ physical pain is similar to falling into a dark abyss. People are depressed, anxious, angry, and socially isolated. In fact, studies have revealed that the impact of chronic pain on a person's quality of life is equivalent to that of suffering from terminal cancer.² I know, because I was a chronic pain sufferer for over fifteen years.



"Severe chronic pain can be compared to falling into an abyss, leaving sufferers depressed, anxious, angry, and socially isolated."

MY STORY OF CHRONIC PAIN

My journey into the Abyss began with a panic attack while driving across a bridge late one night. I was a busy practicing orthopedic spine surgeon, and I was returning from a spine society meeting. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe, my heart started pounding, I felt like I was going to pass out, and possibly die. This episode marked the beginning of a thirteen-year descent into my own personal hell.

I was a master at suppressing stress and my approach was, "bring it on." I felt I could take on an unlimited amount of adversity. It turns out that suppressed thoughts and emotions cause your body to go into a "flight or fight" mode. Sustained exposure to this chemical makeup, increased metabolism (fuel consumption) and inflammation, translates into many mental and physical symptoms. I had been ignoring them for decades and they intensified. They included back pain, burning sensations in my feet, ringing in my ears, migraine headaches, migrating skin rashes, nightmares, and poor sleep. I was able to push through them, but I could not deal with the unbridled anxiety. It was intolerable and the worst part of the ordeal. I eventually developed a severe "internal" obsessive-compulsive disorder marked by intrusive thoughts countered by "better" thoughts. There was no end point.

Since no one seemed know what was happening, no solutions were offered. I lost any ray of hope, and it is the reason I call this state of existence, "The Abyss." The darkness is indescribable. I'm not sure how I made it through. I was experiencing 17 physical and mental symptoms at the same time, but it was the unrelenting anxiety that was intolerable. Even with the support of my family, close friends, colleagues, and patients, I was barely able to hang on.

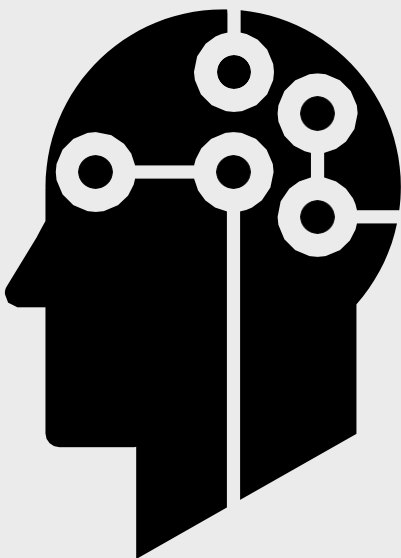
I've been free from the grip of chronic pain for over 20 years. Any recurrence of symptoms is of short duration. I learned how to solve it by mostly error, and when an approach seemed to help, I would pursue it. My slow and intense experience gave me deep insights into the nature of the solutions and has allowed me to help hundreds of patients escape from the Abyss of chronic pain.



EXPRESSIVE WRITING

Expressive writing is simply recording your honest thoughts on paper—both pleasant and unpleasant—with no editing, censoring, or filtering, and then immediately tearing up and discarding it. You don't judge or analyze what you wrote or share it with anyone.³

You might be wondering how this simple activity could impact something so formidable as severe chronic pain. To understand how expressive writing works, it is helpful to explore the nature of chronic mental and physical pain.



THE NATURE OF CHRONIC PAIN

Let's begin with a simple analogy. Imagine accidentally touching a hot burner on a stove. As soon as you feel that intense heat, your hand reflexively recoils. This acute pain—new pain caused by an injury, inflammation, or disease—lights up circuits in the “acute pain center” (nociceptive area) of the brain.

At some tipping point, your brain memorizes the pain (regardless of the body region), and it becomes persistent. It is similar to any learned skill that becomes more embedded with repetition. This happens within six to twelve months.⁴ Similar to riding a bicycle, you can't unlearn it. The current definition of chronic pain is “.....that it is an embedded memory that becomes connected to more and more life circumstances and the memory cannot be erased.”⁵ It is a neurological problem and is much different than acute pain.

So, the neurological circuits in the acute pain center go quiet, and instead, the emotional areas of the brain light up. In other words, the patient experiences the same pain, but a different region of the brain is driving it – the emotional area.⁴



WHEN PAIN LASTS FOR THREE MONTHS OR MORE,
IT IS CONSIDERED "CHRONIC PAIN."

THE "CURSE OF CONSCIOUSNESS"

Humans have a significant survival advantage in that we possess language and consciousness. This allows us to cooperate, and we have risen to the top of the food chain with this capacity to communicate concepts and ideas. However, there is a major problem in that unpleasant thoughts are also sensory input that our nervous system perceives as threats. So, the body's response is still "flight or fight." But since we cannot escape our thoughts, the body will remain on "high alert." Repressing negative thoughts fires all this up even more. Talk therapy can't and doesn't work, as the unconscious brain is so much more powerful than the conscious brain.

These unpleasant repetitive thoughts (URT's) become embedded in our brains and are not subject to reason. My term for them is, "phantom brain pain." One useful metaphor is that of spinning mini tornados that are common in the Midwest called, "dust devils." The more attention you spend on them, the stronger they will become. This translates into threat physiology that creates multiple symptoms, including chronic pain. Every person is subject to this phenomenon. The thoughts are the threat and uncomfortable emotions are the feelings created by this stress physiology.

STRESS IS A WHOLE-BODY RESPONSE TO THREATS

It works both ways. Intense feelings can trigger, amplify, or even create sensations of pain where there is no obvious cause. To make matters worse, pain triggers often operate below our conscious awareness, and they are subject to the stresses of everyday life.

A great many patients in chronic pain come to me complaining of severe pain, after a personal loss such as a death in the family or the loss of a job. For example, Betty, a woman in her sixties with a bone spur in her lower spine, was suffering from a serious case of sciatica. During the course of our conversation, I learned that not only had she just lost her job, but her husband had left her, and her teenage son recently had been diagnosed with cancer.

I explained to her, as I told all my patients, that in the case where a patient is suffering with severe emotional trauma, I wouldn't perform elective spine surgery. My reason was that frequently patients' pain would resolve once they began recovering from their loss. This would happen even when there was a significant structural problem causing their pain. I asked her to try expressive writing and then to progress into other simple practices (sleep, mindfulness, pain education, not discussing her pain, exercise, diet, and learning to process anger) that are aspects of the healing process. She agreed. Details are accessible at The DOC (Direct your Own Care) Journey) at www.thedocjourney.com. Indeed, in about three months, Betty's pain resolved without surgery.



EXPRESSIVE WRITING HOW-TO

1

With pen and paper, write down your thoughts with complete abandon - no editing or censoring. Do not stop to ponder or choose words; just write in a "stream-of-consciousness" style.

2

Once you are finished, destroy your pages. Rip them up into little pieces and throw them away where no one else can find them. Some people shred or burn them.

3

Do this once or twice a day, for five to fifteen minutes, every day. Make it a habit, like brushing your teeth. Even when your pain subsides, retain the expressive writing practice. Keep up your good emotional hygiene.

You may find, as I did, that expressive writing is so effective that it is habit-forming. I have made it an essential part of my daily routine. During those periods when I neglect it, my symptoms return within a couple of weeks. I experience worse sleep, my ears ring, skin rashes reappear on the backs of my wrists, both feet burn, my scalp itches, and I become more anxious and reactive. My wife will often ask me, "Honey, have you been doing your writing?"

WHY IT IS CRITICAL TO TEAR UP YOUR WRITING?

Remember that that you cannot escape from unpleasant thoughts. What the writing does, in my opinion, is it simply separates you from them. As you write, many “issues” will arise. They are not issues. They are just thoughts and any time spent on analyzing them will reinforce them.

The other reason to destroy them is to allow yourself to write with absolute freedom. Most of the research has involved writing about intense emotional experiences or expressing the bizarre, disturbing, and unspeakable thoughts we all automatically repress. By writing with there being no chance of them being discovered, there is more probability that they will emerge. You have broken up the need for mental control, which is the underlying problem and driving force behind them.

However, it is important not to force yourself to express yourself more than you are comfortable with – even if it is just on a piece of paper. You may experience some emotional discomfort, and if it is more than you can tolerate, stop the writing for a while. This is a long-term commitment.

View this process as just an exercise. That is all. It is not the definitive solution for these obsessive thought patterns, but there are also no alternatives. It is a necessary starting point to break them up. The real healing occurs as your nervous system shifts onto more pleasant circuits. But you can't get there without first letting go.

When I began to research expressive writing, I was amazed to discover that there are over 1,250 studies as of 2021 in the neuroscience literature documenting that documented its healing power for both mental and physical disorders.⁶ I spoke to two of the original researchers to validate what I was observing in my practice. Based on my experience working with hundreds of patients, here are what I believe to be the reasons for this treatment's effectiveness in reducing chronic mental and physical pain.





WHY DOES EXPRESSIVE WRITING HELP DECREASE CHRONIC PAIN?

1. You are not your thoughts. The act of writing puts a space between you and your thoughts that is associated with vision and feel, which is an aspect of the unconscious brain. You become the observer of your thoughts rather than identifying with them. You are less likely to automatically react to them and other triggers in your environment.
2. Pain is a danger signal (anxiety). As I discussed earlier, strong emotions are the sensations created by the production of "stress hormones." Anxiety is the pain. The act of writing, "de-energizes" the nature of the input (thoughts) and allows the brain to send out signals of safety. Safety physiology is calming and regenerative. You cannot heal in the presence of ongoing "flight or fight" physiology.
3. Get some sleep. An added bonus is that many people have reported that expressive writing right before bedtime allows them to fall asleep more quickly. Adequate sleep is also necessary for healing.¹⁰
4. Change your brain, lose your pain. By expressive writing, you associate your thoughts with the visual and tactile sensations of writing and also ripping up the pages. Writing in itself is a complex neurological process, as is destroying the pages. All of this results in the establishment of new neural circuits in the brain and new ways of responding to old pain triggers. Neuroplasticity involves three steps – awareness, separation, and reprogramming. Expressive writing accomplishes an awareness and separation in one move, is defined, mechanical, easy to engage in, and begins the process of changing your brain.

As you continue de-energize your pain circuits by writing every day, you'll allow these new, "healthy" circuits to grow stronger and eventually take over the old ones responsible for your experience of pain. This is the miracle of brain plasticity, which allows so many patients to eliminate their chronic pain.

One patient, a professor, came to me with a tight narrowing (spinal stenosis) in his lower back that was causing a lot of pressure on his nerves causing significant leg pain. I told him I thought he would benefit from a simple operation called a laminotomy to relieve the pressure; but not before first trying expressive writing for a couple of weeks. He balked, and I refused to perform his surgery without him first making this one simple effort toward his own recovery. He returned a few weeks later. "This is ridiculous," he said, laughing; "I began the writing, and within a week my pain was gone!" He began to employ the rest of my recommended strategies. Years later he was still pain-free. He may need surgery someday, but meanwhile, why subject him to the risks of back surgery, when he is feeling fine?

- YOU ARE NOT YOUR THOUGHTS.
- PAIN LOVES STRESS.
- CHANGE YOUR BRAIN, LOSE YOUR PAIN.

THE ALTERNATIVE

On the other hand, if you obsess about your thoughts and feelings or try to analyze them too much, you risk strengthening your old pain circuits. Your brain develops in the areas where you place your attention. You might as well voluntarily place your hand back on that hot burner, or into a hornet's nest.

In spite of all the evidence I give my patients, extolling the power of expressive writing, I find it remarkable how many chronic pain sufferers resist this simple exercise.

WHY DO PEOPLE RESIST ENGAGING IN THIS SIMPLE STEP?

I will present my thoughts and observations, including my own resistance to it.

1. It seems too simple to have so much impact on such a huge problem, especially when it is effective as it is. I happened on it by accident without any idea it would have any effect on my prolonged suffering. Within two weeks after starting it, I sensed a definite mood shift and six weeks later, I was beginning to feel much better. This happened after I had been struggling for 15 years without ANY success. It turns out that there are more layers to healing, but it remains a necessary starting point.

The simplicity is still my block in spite of experiencing so much personal success with it. All I have to do is stop for a few weeks and I am reminded of its power every time. About three to five of my symptoms consistently reappear and quickly resolve when I re-engage.

2. The second reason, and also why it works, is that humans have a need for mental control.⁸ The act of writing breaks through this. "Letting go" can be disconcerting and the writing is a defined action to move you forward. Again, there are no alternatives in breaking through this universal trait. It is this need for control that gives rise to disturbing and disruptive thought patterns, which fire up your threat physiology – and thereby your pain.

It is also the reason why it is important to only write to your tolerance. If you begin to develop increased anxiety and agitation, you should immediately discontinue the writing until you feel OK. Then when you restart, begin gently. Most of the research is around dealing with intense emotional experiences. Occasionally, people may decompensate. It is one of the main reasons I advocate for free flow of thought and not try to dig deeply too quickly. I have not seen any problems with a gentler approach, and people continue to do well with it.

3. Your suffering is not being acknowledged. How can something this straightforward counteract your intense pain? It may feel like an insult to you. It is not. Research has shown that the impact of chronic pain on the quality of your life is similar to that of having terminal cancer.² We understand that. Remember that it is just an exercise and the starting point. There are other layers to the healing journey.

OTHER WRITING TECHNIQUES

1. VERBAL EXPRESSION

A. IN FRONT OF A MIRROR – or NOT

Dr. Wegner, author of the famous “White Bears” article⁹ on suppressing thoughts pointed out that the verbal route of expressing thoughts is also effective. I recall in the midst of my misery that one exercise that helped create a shift was one suggested by David Burns in his book, *Feeling Good*. He said to stand in front of a mirror and talk to that person using the self-critical voices in your head. You would never talk to another person in that manner. Of course, you can speak with freedom as there is nothing to destroy. I have to say that it was rather disconcerting I, and I quickly realized how toxic these thoughts were. So, I suggest to my patients that they can express themselves verbally in private with or without a mirror.

B. SWITCH TO THE THIRD PERSON

One research paper¹¹ looked at switching the self-talk voice from the first to the third person. Of course, most of our self-talk is negative, which is an unfortunate part of the human experience. They were able to document on functional MRI (fMRI) scans, which documents areas of brain activity, that this process calmed down the region of the amygdala (considered the danger signal area) without engaging the higher thinking areas of the brain. In other words, it cut through the need for using your cognitive function to do battle with anxiety.

2. “AIR WRITING” and OTHER APPROACHES

I have no data on this concept but I have patients tell me that if they wake up at night, they will “write” on the palm of the opposite hand or on their chest with their finger. They feel it is helpful. The main overall idea is to “externalize” and separate from your thoughts.

One physician friend of mine related to me that he visualizes himself sitting in a theater and “watches” himself perform aspects of his life on stage. There is a separation feel to this exercise.

People often become frustrated because they don't know what to write or the same thoughts keep coming up. That is fine and it also doesn't matter. It is just a separation exercise. One approach is to just doodle on a piece of paper and if a word enters your mind, just write it down and keep doodling.

3. THE “THREE-COLUMN METHOD”

After you have become comfortable with writing down and immediately destroying your thoughts, another powerful option is using the “three-column technique that Dr. David Burns outlines in his book, *Feeling Good*.³ It provides an excellent format in which to apply the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy in a self-directed manner.

I personally used the book extensively for many years, and the three-column technique was a major factor in pulling me out of my free fall. I realized that it was a tool I could use in my own practice, and I liked using it because it was so much faster than trying to get someone to see a pain psychologist. They could engage almost instantly and often aggressively. This book was the entire component of the stress management for the DOC Project for many years. I originally told my patients that if they could learn some stress .

management skills, they would at least cope better. I was surprised to see many patients report both a better quality of life and a significant decrease in pain. However, it was puzzling to me why some patients would respond so much better than others. It eventually became clear that the patients who did well were the ones who participated in the writing process. The results have been consistent. Patients who commit to a daily writing process, based on the suggestions in the book consistently have a significant calming response.

His book is a wonderful book, but I have them initially read only the first third of the book to get started in the "three-column technique." He outlines ten "errors in thinking." They cover the range of cognitive distortions. We all use them frequently, as that is how we were raised. Some of the categories he describes are:

- "Should" thinking
- Catastrophizing
- Labeling
- Minimizing the positive
- Emphasizing the negative
- Emotional reasoning
- Mind reading

In the first column you write down your "ANT". That stands for "automatic negative thought. This step represents the first step of stimulating neuroplasticity, which is increasing the awareness of the disruptive thought.



Then you write down the "error in thinking" that the thought represents in the second column. There are often a few of them. As you categorize the thought and understand the effect it has on your peace of mind, it separates you from it, which is the second step of stimulating neuroplastic changes.

In the third column you write down the more rational thought. The more specific you are the better. This is the final phase of neuroplasticity of burning in a new circuit. We have also found out that you can just work on the first two steps of writing down and categorizing the thought and skip this step. Just move on. Once you realize that a given cognitive distortion is not connected to reality, then you can simply let it go. There is nothing to "fix" since it isn't real in the first place.

For example, your son may have just flunked a test. Your first response might be, "He is lazy and stupid." You would write those thoughts down in the first column. In the second column you would note that represents "labeling". In the third column you might write, "My son just flunked a test. I wonder why. Is he being bullied at school? Could he be depressed? I am going to try to find out what is going on." Positive thinking would be represented by, "He isn't lazy. He is my son and I love him." That might be it. Except, without writing the more specific rational response, your thoughts might start spinning around. By the time you actually talk to him, you might not be in a great frame of mind. A more constructive alternative might be to spend some enjoyable time with him and see what transpires.

4. USING A KEYBOARD

People will often wonder if typing your thoughts on a computer and then immediately hitting the "delete" button is as effective as handwriting. There isn't data to say if it is better or not and it would be hard to measure. I asked Dr. Pennebaker, one of the original pioneers of expressive writing, and he felt it was a reasonable approach.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING?

The benefits are so numerous that I am going to just present a list of some of them. You will notice that there are improvements in many different domains – physical, mental, immune function, performance, and disease states. You might wonder why it has such a wide range of effects. I can only postulate and give my opinion.

Somehow, the exercise addresses root cause of chronic diseases. We know sustained exposure to flight or fight chemistry breaks down the tissues in your body. A core reason for being in prolonged flight or fight is our consciousness in the form of unpleasant thoughts. Suppressed thoughts fire up threat physiology even more than experienced ones. We cannot escape from our thoughts, but expressive writing separates us from them. You have changed the input into your nervous system and also addressed the human need for mental control. You are releasing these thoughts as well as creating “space” between you and them. It is in this “space” that you can redirect and calm down your body's threat response.

Here is a short list of the benefits of expressive writing. For a more exhaustive review, please refer to Dr. Pennebaker's and Dr. Smyth's book, *Opening Up by Writing it Down*.⁶ They are two of the pioneers in this arena.

- Improved sleep
- Better academic performance
- Optimized athletic performance
- Decreased pain
- Improved energy/ less fatigue
- Reduced symptoms in autoimmune disorders
 - Rheumatoid arthritis
 - Systemic Lupus Erythematosus
- Fewer irritable bowel symptoms
- Better function in patients with fibromyalgia
- Improved breathing in moderately severe asthma patients
- Decreased viral load in HIV patient and improved survival
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduced symptoms of depression
- Less reactivity in PTSD
- Smoking cessation
- Improved working memory
- Breaking through writer's block
- Improved problem solving

They discuss many details of expressive writing, and there is much research still needed to find the best fit for a given person and their medical issues. There are many scenarios that are suspected to be helped with expressive writing, but the above ones are well documented. The bottom line is that some form of expressive writing benefits your physical and mental health but should never be considered a definitive solution by itself. It is worth exploring what form of it works best for you.

PRECAUTIONS

Most of the research has been done asking patients to write about deeply emotional experiences. The effects of writing down random thoughts or simply discussing how your day is going is not as effective. However, rarely a person may dive into the writing and react badly to the point of mentally decompensating. I have witnessed this on a couple of occasions.

Expressive writing physically affects your nervous system activity, alters your metabolism (fuel consumption), and changes the profile of your stress chemistry that is regulated through the autonomic nervous system (nerve supply to your internal organs).

So many years ago, I asked patients simply just to write in a "stream of consciousness" mode. Anything would do. It allowed people to write to their comfort level. It fitted into my concept of healing in that it is important to be nice to yourself in every realm of your life. If the writing creates more discomfort than you can tolerate, then stop immediately and resume only when you feel better. You can also regulate the intensity of what you write down.

Although the benefits may not occur as quickly with less intense writing, it still has a tremendous benefit if it is done long-term. It can be done for as little as a couple of minutes a day. My opinion is that the "space" created between you and your thoughts is a metaphor for that day and changes your relationship to them.



THE TAKE-AWAY

People with chronic pain have permanently embedded pain circuits that are easily triggered by stressful thoughts, emotions, and events in their daily lives. You cannot unlearn old pain circuits; but you can build new ones and shift onto more pleasant ones that bypass the pain circuits.

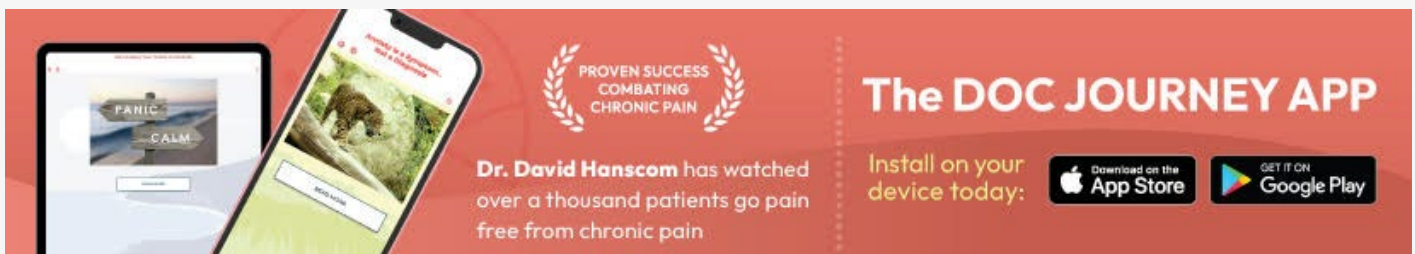
Expressive writing—jotting down your uncensored thoughts a few minutes once or twice a day and then destroying what you have written— helps your brain relearn and "rewire" its response to the experiences that trigger threat physiology and pain.

Expressive writing is only one of many powerful healing strategies for eliminating chronic pain. Other tools include active meditation, getting better sleep, anger processing, breath work, exercise, diet, medications when necessary, and identifying stress-producing triggers. However, of all of these, writing is the necessary foundational element. I have seen few patients deeply heal without engaging with this core exercise.

The journey out of chronic mental and physical pain begins the day you start to write.¹²

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